

Montgomery Preservation Inc.

Promoting the Preservation, Protection and Enjoyment of Montgomery County's Rich Architectural Heritage and Historic Landscapes

**Edward U. Taylor Elementary School and Weller's Dry Cleaning
Written Testimony to County Council – re: public hearing on April 25, 2023
Eileen McGuckian, President, Montgomery Preservation, Inc. (MPI)**

Edward U. Taylor School and Weller's Dry Cleaning stand strongly on their own, together portraying two different and important aspects of Montgomery County in postwar America. Both historic resources meet and excel County standards for historic designation, representing the best in their respective domains. Both are mid-20th century historic resources that are not adequately represented on the Montgomery County Master Plan for Historic Preservation. Both are intact -- immediately recognizable historic buildings – with street appeal that declares their places in local history and beyond. Where they diverge is that one has a reasonably secure future, and the other desperately needs protection from being obliterated.

EDWARD U. TAYLOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, opened in 1952

Edward Ulysses Taylor grew up in Emory Grove when Black students had to go elsewhere beyond 8th grade. After graduating from Howard University, he returned home to educate the next generations. His career paralleled that of better-known Edwin W. Broome, who became Superintendent of Schools in 1917 and convinced the Montgomery County School Board to bring on a Black supervisor for the Negro schools. Mr. Taylor was hired permanently in 1924.

For the next 27 years, Taylor and Broome were in lock step. Broome's 36 years as superintendent are known for expansion to kindergarten and 12 grades, and for accommodating our exploding population. Taylor fought for higher teacher salaries, summer training, and maternity leave. He helped to open the first high school in Rockville in 1927 and became its principal. There he taught social studies in the morning and visited elementary schools in the afternoon. In the 1930s and '40s, he led the Colored schools through closings of poorly maintained small schools in favor of larger and better facilities that still fell below the standard for White students.

After Mr. Taylor's death in 1951, it was fitting for one of the four new brick consolidated Colored schools to be named for him. Edward U. Taylor Elementary was the first to recognize a Black hero. It was state of the art, a move toward equal facilities only a few years before *Brown vs Board*. A decade later, Taylor was the only formerly Black school to become a mainstream integrated elementary. Taylor's juxtaposition near the one-room Boyds Negro School that opened the year of *Plessy vs Ferguson* is striking.

Montgomery Preservation concurs with the Planning Board and HPC that this site meets three criteria to earn designation on the Montgomery County Master Plan for Historic Preservation.

WELLER'S DRY CLEANING STORE, opened in 1961

Weller's Dry Cleaning is the best surviving example of "Googie-style" Mid-century Modern architecture in our county. Its whimsical, futuristic design typifies the kind of automobile-centric culture that was central to the development of suburban Silver Spring, and its physical presence is critical to understanding Silver Spring and suburban Montgomery County today. MPI concurs with Planning Staff and the HPC that Weller's is eligible for designation on the Master Plan, via criteria 2a and 2e.

Weller's has been identified by multiple experts and advocates, including architectural historians and planners, for two decades. It has been highlighted in multiple surveys, in adopted Master plans, and in a ground-breaking publication. In every instance, as County plans evolved, calls were made to preserve this unique property. Supporters of Weller's historic designation include the Art Deco Society of Washington DC, Preservation Maryland, Docomomo DC (public awareness of architecture and sites in the DMV), Silver Spring Historical Society, Robert Bachman (expert, speaker on Montgomery County in 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s), Alan Hess (architect, historian, author, critic for *San Jose Mercury News*), and Teresa Lachin (author of *Rockville's Recent Past*). All agree that it is high time to act decisively because: *When a building is gone, it is gone.*

Locational Atlas and Master Plan for Historic Preservation

In the late 1970s I was part of the Sugarloaf Regional Trails team that assisted the Planning Board to create background documents and draft the Master Plan for Historic Preservation. All of us believed, naively as it turned out, that it would be a smooth process to evaluate all sites on the 1976 *Locational Atlas* to determine which should be designated. In 1978 the County Council enacted an interim ordinance that required review of Atlas sites before they could be demolished. This was immediately effective in Takoma Park, where Montgomery College was razing blocks of Victorian houses.

When the Master Plan and Preservation ordinance were adopted in 1979, the Atlas was kept as a stop-gap to review proposed demolitions and substantial alterations, vital to protect sites that had not yet completed the lengthy process of being approved by the Planning Board and adopted by the Council. With 143 of the original sites and districts on the Atlas remaining to be evaluated, this document is still important. However, as a 1976 inventory, the Atlas does not cover Mid-century Modern sites. This, and that County DPS does not always enforce disclosure of Atlas status, results in lack of review for major exterior alterations to Atlas sites.

Mid-20th Century Historic Sites

In these 45 years, the Planning Board and Council have pretty much ignored a major era in County history. The post-WW2 period brought huge change in our demographics, in commercial and residential development, and architectural styles. Clare Lise Kelly's *Montgomery Modern* publication, sponsored by M-NCPPC in 2015, helps to fill this gap; Weller's appears in color on page 96.

Lack of concern about mid-20th-century history being destroyed is short-sighted and distressing. We are losing gems and icons of period architecture, particularly in our down-county suburban areas. *When they are gone, they are gone.*

Historic Preservation and Property Owner Consent

MPI is aware of Weller's owner to designation of her property. Owners are key to protection and restoration of historic properties. Owning one and maintaining it for future generations (whether related to you or not) is the most successful way to honor and use historic sites.

That said, very few preservation laws in the United States require consent of the property owner for designation. *Neither Maryland nor Montgomery County require it.* In fact, if all property owners were cooperative regarding zoning, planning, maintenance, and preserving their historic buildings, fewer laws would be needed.

This is solid legal ground. The U.S. Supreme Court has weighed in more than once on the rights of states and cities to enact land use controls to preserve historic sites. The Court ruled that “preservation ... is a permissible goal of government action” and that “communities have the right to be beautiful” as well as healthy, clean, and protected. Specifically, the Court stated that land use controls may be used “to enhance the quality of life by preserving desirable aesthetic features of the city.... and that preservation of landmarks benefits the citizenry economically as well as by improving the overall quality of life.”

Montgomery County has a solid record of informing owners and taking their preferences seriously. That is continuing here. Even so, there have been times when rights of the public to be beautiful as well as clean have trumped owner reluctance. And in every one of those cases, this has proven to be the right action. Most of those objections faded as situations and ownership changed, incentives were taken advantage of, creative new uses were found, and *communities recognized the public benefit* of preserving historic sites.

Not all Master Plan nominations have been supported by their owners

To the best of recollections, no Montgomery County Historic District -- from our earliest Capitol View Park Historic District to the recent designation of Greenwich Forest – has come in with 100% support of property owners.... with the one exception of Potomac Overlook.

Some examples of Montgomery County sites designated over the objection of their owners:

Silver Spring Theatre & Shopping Center– citizen outcry, rescued, now thriving arts venue and businesses
Carver High School & Jr College – student and citizen advocacy, repurposed as BOE administration building
Uncle Tom’s Cabin, now known as Josiah Henson house – owners respected history but concerned about privacy; one of first 61 designated sites, sold to M-NCPPC 2006, on the National Register 2011
Falkland Apartments, Silver Spring – remains affordable, charming housing
Hyatt-Jones house on Georgia Avenue near Olney – flourishing antique business
Canada Dry building, Silver Spring – owners appreciate unique residential marketing

Designation and preservation of Weller’s will not restrict this owner from developing her property. No one has been lecturing to or patronizing this owner. A savvy merchant would use Google charm to attract customers, which of course is what the Weller brothers did. In our time of needing to ask “Which city am I in?” unique architecture stands out. With its great curb appeal this gem could be used as the entrance to or part of a larger future residential or commercial project. Whoever the owner and whatsoever its use, this landmark deserves to gracefully age in place.

Preservationists have no illusions about our place in this fast-moving world. MPI has recognized more than 300 owners with awards over decades, but in reality we often lose battles. However, it is rare for a site to earn as much passion as has this little building. There are solid reasons for professional staff and a dedicated commission to be unanimous about Weller’s, and for so many different groups and individuals to agree on its significance. *Remember: when it’s gone, It’s gone.*

In closing, MPI urges the Council to designate Weller's Dry Cleaning on the Master Plan for Historic Preservation. This would not only provide full protection to this unique building but also offer incentives to the owners to maintain, restore, and re-use it and return it as the gateway to the Fenton Village district. Please save this prominent emblem of small business strategies and commercial Mid-century Modern architecture.

MPI also requests that you vote to designate Edward U Taylor School on the Master Plan for Historic Preservation. Education and the African American experience are major components of our County's history, into today.

We hope you will agree that these actions are unquestionably favorable to the public interest.

Sincerely,

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